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Networking or not working?

A comparison of Arab Spring coverage in Belgian newspapers and TV news

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Abstract

This paper examines journalists' changing sourcing practices in the context of globalisation and developments in media technologies. It departs from Heinrich's concept of "network journalism" that theorizes contemporary news as a product of "*a complex collaborative network of national and transnational information gatherers, producers and disseminators (...) that allows the integration of a great variety of voices*" (2011:55-56). Especially the interactivity, connectivity, and flexibility of social media such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube invite a more diverse use of journalistic sources that might lead to a more global – instead of domesticated – outlook in international news coverage and a more balanced media access for a wider range of actors, including civil society organisations and individual citizens. We developed a quantitative content analysis to examine how extensively Belgian journalists practiced network journalism during the Arab Spring in 2011. More specifically, we analysed a total sample of 1121 news items about the street protests in Syria, Egypt and Tunisia, in four Belgian newspapers (two popular and two quality dailies) and two Belgian broadcasters (the public broadcaster VRT and the commercial channel VTM). The analysis shows that Belgian news coverage of the Arab Spring to a certain degree adapted to the new reality of "network journalism", especially in the Syrian case, compared to previous research. From a comparative perspective, we found more signs of network journalism practices in quality compared to popular media, and in TV news compared to newspaper articles.

Introduction

In the contemporary context of globalisation and cross-national exchanges, foreign coverage is an increasingly important source of information for citizens "*to expand their knowledge about the world beyond the immediate horizons of lived experience*" (Smith 2005:1471). Yet ample studies have shown that the narration of international events is often distorted by national lenses and an overrepresentation of elite countries and elite or mainstream sources (e.g. Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Joye, 2010; Van Leuven, Deprez and Raeymaeckers, 2013; Wouters, De Swert and Walgrave, 2009). Journalists produce news in a commercial context and therefore need to balance professional values and economic expectations. Besides a few exceptions such as investigative journalistic projects, everyday news production requires journalists to produce news with limited resources and in a limited time frame. The need to consult efficient and reliable sources results in a journalistic preference for powerful and well-

resourced sources – such as politicians, government institutions, companies and experts – that are often called “primary definers” because of their privileged news access (Gans 1979; Hall et al. [1978] 1999; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Furthermore research has shown that news organisations increasingly replace their network of correspondents with news agency copy as part of cost-cutting measures. Many authors complain that the dependency on three Western international news wires (AP, Reuters, AFP) is reflected in a focus on elite – Western – countries whose interpretation of world events is merely domesticated for a national public (Hafez 2009; Joye 2010; Paterson and Sreberny 2004; Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett 2004; Wouters, De Swert and Walgrave 2009).

However, in light of recent advancements in digital technologies and within a global arena of news provision, news from across the world increasingly reaches audiences through many more channels, including social media platforms (Castells 2011; Heinrich 2011, 2012). In the context of the globalization, glocalization and digitalization of human interaction, and in accordance with the work of Castells (2008), some scholars state that the network is the *“new dominant social structure in contemporary societies [...] in which our ability to connect beyond time and space constraints takes center stage”* (Heinrich 2011:23-24). These authors claim that the new, global environment is—or should be—characterized by a novel, networked mode of communication that can be described as a synthesis of interpersonal and mass communication, in which audiences and mass media producers are connected in one, networked media matrix (Castells 2008; Hafez 2009; Hermida 2010; Lopez Rabadan 2011). In the context of news production, Heinrich (2011) contends that journalistic organizations should go through a structural transformation and adapt to the sphere of “network journalism” in order to allow journalists to navigate the new global information map. The increased speed of information dissemination and the connectivity within the network sphere allow for non-linear, decentralized and multi-directional information flows between the (almost) uncountable nodes in the network. *“The many information providers meet in a digitally connected global arena. A large array of potential new sources can now be reached via many connection points other than (traditional) official sources such as governmental institutions or press offices. Instead of a rather ‘closed’ system of newsgathering, production and distribution, in which only a limited number of partakers had the power to make and shape news, the network journalism sphere is an open space of information exchange”* (Heinrich 2012:767). Some authors state that today more than ever before, non-mainstream sources—as nodes in the network—have at their disposal the channels necessary to gain access to journalists, namely the Internet and especially Web 2.0 and social media. Web 2.0 refers to the changing use of the World Wide Web as a platform whereby content and applications are *“continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion”* (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009:61), and is contrasted with traditional uses of Internet based on individual contributions. Social media, a term that has been broadly used since 2005, are defined as *“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content, namely [...] the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users”* (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009:61). Some well-known examples are weblogs, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. In contrast with the traditional means for information dissemination, such as press releases or personal relationships with journalists, social media allow users to spread information cheaply, dynamically and instantaneously throughout their network. The interactivity, connectivity, and flexibility of social media platforms enable users to hook up

with others in virtually any connected spot on earth. As a result, they can open the news gates for non-mainstream sources (Brants 2005; Castells 2008; Downey and Fenton 2003; Kaplan and Haenlein 2009; Webster 2011). *“Within the interactive spheres of such networks, links are shared, information distributed and news are commented on a scale not seen before. Many of the information providers who run these blogs, Twitter accounts or Facebook pages are citizen journalists, pressure groups or private persons whose intention is not necessarily to act as journalists. However, they have access to pieces of information that potentially add to the overall picture of news stories. And as stories unfold in virtually no time online, this new breed of information providers is capable of adding viewpoints, story angles or background information that might otherwise go uncovered. Yet: How can traditional media organizations seize these kinds of information for the purpose of journalistic coverage?”* (Heinrich 2012:766-767).

Several studies illustrate that in the everyday news production process, social media are rarely used as a means to access alternative sources as many journalists admit they struggle with “information overload”, language hurdles, and the doubted reliability of online information (Hafez 2009; Knight 2011; Lariscy et al. 2009; Paulussen and Ugille 2008; Van Leuven et al. 2013). In contrast, case studies point out that journalists might be more inclined to “practice” network journalism in the context of breaking news or media restrictions where they cannot (immediately) access the area themselves and therefore try to *“learn from on-the-ground sources”* (Lotan et al. 2011:1376). *“Take the start of the Egyptian uprisings in January 2011 as an example where some demonstrators took reporting matters into their own hands. Located in Tahrir square, bloggers or Twitterers such as Nora Shalaby (twitter name @norashalaby), Mahmoud Salem (@sandmonkey), Hossam el-Hamalawy (@3arabawy) or Mona Seif (@Monasosh) sent Tweets from inside the crowd (...) Each of these information providers were just a few of many. What could be witnessed on TV or online, on traditional news outlets, or on Twitter, were numerous updates roaming through the global information space. They all contributed to a mix of perspectives contextualizing the events. Each provider added just one piece to the complex, unfolding story line. At times domesticated for a specific national audience, yet accessible for a global community of consumers, the information pieces taken together formed a complex news map of the events”* (Heinrich 2012:768). The analysis presented in this paper rests on a quantitative content analysis to discuss if and how Flemish news coverage of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria adapted to this new reality of “network journalism”. More specifically, the focus is set on four Flemish newspapers (two popular and two quality dailies) and two Flemish broadcasters (the public broadcaster Eén and the commercial channel VTM) in order to search for inter-media differences and similarities. The central research question deals with how Flemish news coverage of the Arab Spring invites a more diverse use of sources.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this article discusses if and how Belgian news coverage of the Arab Spring shows signs of more diverse sourcing practices (RQ1-3). The Arab Spring is an umbrella term used to describe the wave of democratic grass roots uprisings in many North-African countries in 2011, but we focus on three cases, more specifically Egypt, Tunisia and

Syria. We developed a quantitative content analysis to examine coverage of the Arab Spring in four Belgian newspapers and two Belgian broadcasters.

RQ1 – Are non-mainstream sources (ordinary citizens and non-mainstream groups) important information sources in coverage of the Arab Spring?

RQ2 – Are social media used as information channel in coverage of the Arab Spring?

RQ3 – Is the news about the Arab Spring written from the perspective of the participants in the drama or is the news domesticated for a Belgian/Western audience?

We applied selective sampling to collect all articles in the time frame of the actual street protests because at those moments demonstrators took reporting matters into their own hands, therefore acting as a potential networked news source for foreign reporters (Heinrich 2012). For the Tunisian case we selected all items from 18 December 2010 until 28 February 2011. For the Egyptian case we selected all items from 25 January 2011 up to 14 February 2011. Finally, for the Syrian case we selected all articles from 15 March 2011 until the association of opposition groups in the Syrian National Transitional Council on 17 July 2011 (sample period until 18 July 2011). We selected two popular (*Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) and two quality (*De Standaard* and *De Morgen*) newspapers. These are Belgium's four most important Flemish language newspapers. We furthermore included both Flemish newscasts on the public broadcaster Eén and the commercial broadcaster VTM. All newspaper articles were collected via Mediargus (Belgian equivalent of LexisNexis), all broadcast items via the Electronic News Archive. Based on the assumption that quality news media are believed to save more resources for quality and innovation in foreign coverage (Wolfsfeld 2011), we formulate a fourth research question:

RQ4 – Are the characteristics of network journalism more often observed in quality than in popular news media?

Finally, we will also analyze to what extent organizational characteristics such as the necessity to provide video footage for TV coverage or the bigger publication volume in newspapers impacts on the incorporation of network journalism practices. In other words, we will also look for inter-media differences (RQ5).

RQ5 – Can we observe differences in the use of networked sourcing practices in newspaper and television news?

In total, 1121 news items were selected and analysed by a team of four trained coders. A coding guide and registration form¹ were developed to ensure uniformity in the selection and analytical choices. A critically composed sample of 40 articles was tested for intercoder reliability with an outcome of Cohen's Kappa values ranging from 0.76 up to 1.00. Analysis was carried out using PASW Statistics 18. All reported results are significant at $p \leq 0.05$ level unless indicated otherwise.

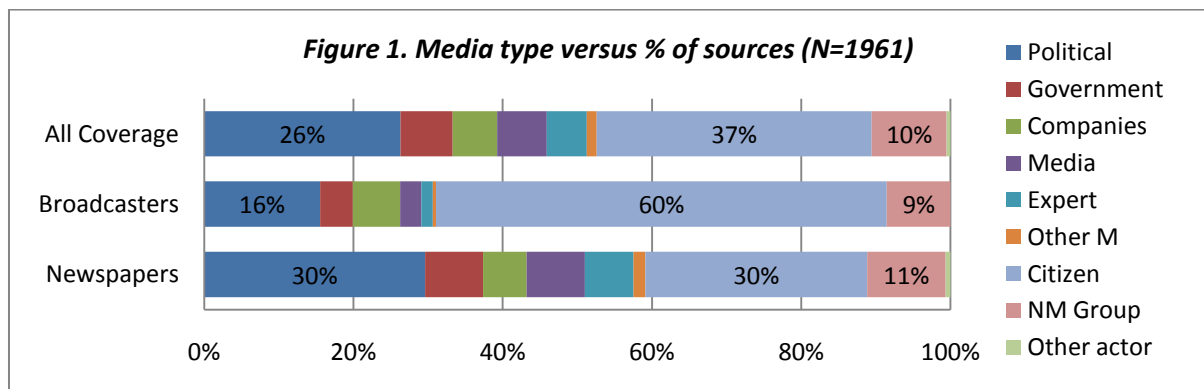
Results

The main body of 1121 analyzed items consists of newspaper articles (79.5%) compared to 20.5% broadcast pieces. The distribution of news about the Arab uprisings between popular

and quality media confirms that quality media report more international news than popular media (Joye, 2010). We found that 70.8% of the news items are published or broadcasted in quality newspapers and the public broadcaster (De Standaard, De Morgen, Eén) compared to only 29.2% in popular newspapers and the commercial broadcaster (Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, VTM). Despite the shorter sample period, the uprising in Egypt generated the highest percentage of articles in the total sample (45.3%) followed by Syria (24.4%) and Tunisia (16.4%). 13.9 per cent of the articles combined coverage of one of these countries with coverage of the Arab Spring in one or more other countries and are therefore more generally categorized as “Arab Spring”.

RQ1 – The role of non-mainstream sources?

Figure 1 shows that ordinary citizens are prominent sources in our study: they outnumber all other sources with a total of 723 ordinary citizens in 1121 articles, or 36.9% of all 1961 sources. This number is irrefutably higher compared to previous research (Van Leuven et al., 2013). Political sources (26.3%) follow at the second rank. Non-mainstream groups such as NGOs or civil movements (generally groups of demonstrators) are ranked third (10.0%). The top three is followed by government sources (7.0%), journalists (6.6%), companies (6.0%), experts (5.4%), a residual category of other mainstream sources (1.3%), and a residual category of indefinable sources (0.5%). The fact that ordinary citizens and non-mainstream groups quantitatively outnumber most mainstream sources in this study is a first indication of their importance in Belgian coverage of the Arab Spring. If we make a more broad comparison, the quantitative importance of alternative news sources finds further confirmation in the balance between 920 (46.9%) non-mainstream sources and 1031 (52.6%) mainstream sources.



In the total sample, the majority of sources are personally involved in the event (45.9%) or provide eyewitness reports (34.8%). Most ordinary citizens are not quoted as vox pop (11.5%) just to add colour to mainstream sources' account of the happenings, but instead they are mostly consulted as eyewitnesses (78.6%). Many of them are Arab demonstrators that testify about their participation in the street protests or Belgian tourists about their evacuation from the holiday resorts. Although we cannot conclude merely on the basis of these findings that every eyewitness account brings more viewpoints and story angles on board (as is envisioned by the framework of network journalism), it cannot be ignored that ordinary citizens are more prominent in coverage of the Arab Spring and are more often given the chance to testify about their own experiences compared to previous research (Van Leuven et al. 2013). This assumption is further strengthened as we found that most ordinary citizens are Arabs and non-mainstream sources are significantly ($p=0.000$) more prominent

in quality (48.7% of all sources in quality media) compared to popular media (40.3%), which goes against complaints about tabloidization (Hauttekeete 2004). The relatively higher prominence of ordinary citizens in quality media in this study seems to be inspired by network journalism practices as contrasted with a commercial strategy to attract a bigger audience that is often applied by popular media (**RQ4**).

Nonetheless we also found signs of traditional sourcing practices as, in accordance with previous research (Van Leuven et al. 2013), the analysis shows that ordinary citizens are relatively more present in background articles. In contrast, most mainstream sources (besides experts who are almost exclusively consulted to provide background information) are relatively more present in factual news reports where journalists have less room for active news gathering and prefer to rely on official sources (Gans 1979). Moreover, if we only consider the 763 sources that are firstly quoted in each article (“dominant” sources that can set the frame), our original optimism is tempered as 32.1% of all dominant sources are political sources. This finding points out that – although ordinary citizens are most prominent in the overall coverage – journalists still prefer to place “authoritative” sources first to introduce an issue and thereby set its interpretation framework, which is in line with traditional literature on source selection (Gans 1979; Hall et al. [1978] 1999). This finding is confirmed if we make a more broad comparison between mainstream (61.9% of all dominant sources) and non-mainstream sources (37.9% of all dominant sources), where the balance lifts more towards mainstream sources compared to the overall coverage (52.6% of all sources, cf. supra). There is nonetheless reason for optimism about the importance of non-mainstream sources in the case of the Arab Spring as ordinary citizens (25.7%) and non-mainstream groups (12.2%) follow at rank two and three in the calculation of dominant sources. This finding is especially important as NGOs, social movements and groups of demonstrators are more important as dominant news sources compared to the overall coverage (10.0%), which especially for NGOs points to their development as authoritative news sources in given fields of discourse (Davis 2000).

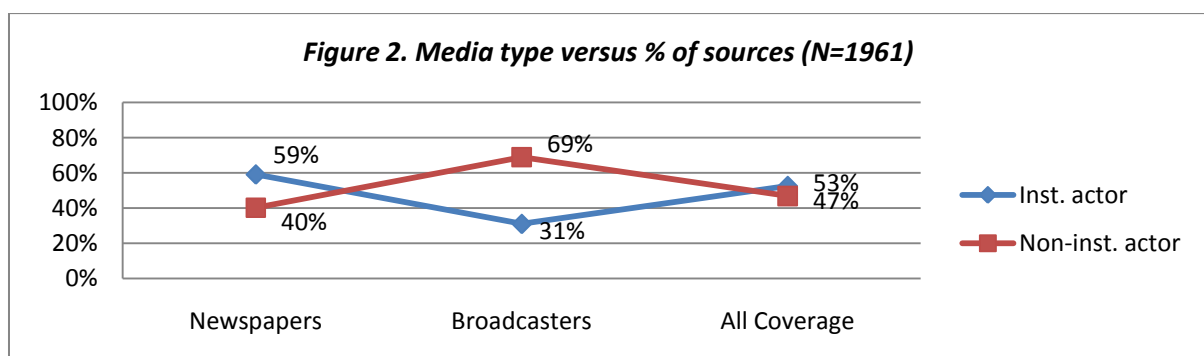


Figure 1 and 2 point out important differences in sourcing practices between newspapers and broadcasters (**RQ5**). If we only consider newspaper articles, the presence of ordinary citizens decreases until 29.7% while the presence of all mainstream sources – and especially political sources (29.6%) increases. In general, mainstream sources are dominant (59.1%) in newspapers although the gap is less significant compared to previous research (Van Leuven et al. 2013). In contrast, ordinary citizens dominate broadcast news (60.4% of all sources in broadcast news). A possible explanation can be found in the bigger publication space of newspapers that lends itself to a more contextual treatment of events while broadcasters are faced with limited airtime and are therefore often forced to treat the news in a more

superficial manner. Combined with the higher importance of the visual element in broadcast news these differences result in a higher emphasis on spectacle in television news and more references to ordinary people that eye witnessed or experienced the dramatic event. Indeed, the finding that most sources in television news are eyewitnesses (62.4%) from Belgian, Egypt, or Tunisian origin indicates that many of the sources in broadcast news of the revolts are Arab demonstrators or Belgian tourists in Egypt and Tunisia. This conclusion is important as it shows how television news, by interviewing demonstrators in the streets “*grants authority to the subjects of this coverage because of its use of film as a mode of ‘eyewitness’ observation*” (Peer and Chestnut 1995:83).

RQ2 – The role of social media and amateur footage

As far as we can observe in the news output (as journalists do not always explicitly mention their sources), social media are consulted in 10.3% of the articles which is a substantially higher proportion compared to previous research (Van Leuven et al. 2013). The most important social media sources are Facebook (43 uses in 1121 articles/items), followed by Twitter (35), YouTube (28), WikiLeaks (18), nawaat.org’s Tunileaks (5), and several personal blogs (11). 79 of 128 quotes (61.7%) that are sourced via social media are attributed to ordinary citizens or from a different perspective, a substantive amount of 11.0% of all ordinary citizens are sourced via social media (as far as we can observe in the news output). Eleven social media quotes are attributed to non-mainstream groups. Most of the sources that were sourced via social media are Egyptian (34), Tunisian (7) and Syrian (12). It is nonetheless clear from the analysis that Belgian newspaper journalists still seem to struggle with social media sourcing. Examples where social media sourcing really adds value to the coverage are exceptional (e.g. references to nawaat.org, a website run by Tunisian activists outside the country). In many cases, social media quotes are not integrated in the news article, but instead displayed in a separate column as a means to illustrate the content of the news article. For example, on 3, 5, 11 and 12 February, *De Standaard* added Twitter and Facebook quotes to articles about the Egypt uprising in a separate column (44 quoted sources in total). Most of the quotes express the experiences and emotions of participants in the Egyptian uprising (e.g. “You can do it!!! Tunisia supports u! Good luck ☺” or “Pffffff hurry up Moebarak, we still have 20 countries to liberate”). One article discusses the role of social media in the Egyptian uprising which is exemplified by adding a few examples of tweets in a separate column (e.g. “It smelled tear gasses, but mostly freedom #jan25 #Egypt #Tahrir”). In terms of the conceptual framework of network journalism, on the one hand some authors are delighted over the increased means for expression for non-mainstream sources (Dahlgren and Gurevitch 2005; McNair 2009), on the other hand some authors question how far these personal comments really add depth and new viewpoints to the coverage, especially when they are not integrated in the news article but instead “*packaged away from traditional media coverage*” (Heinrich 2012:769).

We checked for media differences and found that quality news media ($p=0.006$) and newspapers ($p=0.003$) significantly more than popular news media and broadcasters use social media sources, discuss social media as a topic, or merely mention social media in their coverage (**RQ 4** and **RQ 5**). However, we did not count “amateur videos” in broadcast news as social media sources because it was not explicitly mentioned how these videos were distributed. It is yet highly presumable that most of these were distributed via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or other social media platforms. As 17.5% of broadcast news or 3.6% of the total coverage contains amateur footage, the combined count of social media

sources and amateur footage results in a considerable 13.9% of all coverage where journalists make use of social media sources. From this point of view it is clear that broadcasters – as far as we can observe in the news output – significantly more than newspapers made use of user-generated content and social media platforms in their coverage of the Arab Spring. This is again related to the high importance of the visual element in broadcast news that prompts journalists to use non-official footage when no other footage is available. The public broadcaster stand for 34 of 40 uses of amateur footage, which is related to the fact that 35 of 40 uses of amateur footage occur in coverage on the Syrian uprising. The fact that the commercial broadcaster reported on the Syrian uprising in only 6 items explains why most amateur footage uses are ascribed to the public broadcaster.

In the case of newspapers, we analyzed the sources of pictures separately. 403 of 892 newspaper articles (45.2%) contained one or more pictures. It is not a surprise that most pictures are delivered by (photo) news agencies (81.1%) and professional photographers (6.7%). The maker of the picture(s) is unknown in another 6.7% of the cases. Most importantly, we see that social media (4.2%) and other internet (1.2%) pictures are rarely used in our newspaper sample. If we compare this to the much higher use of social media material and especially amateur footage (17.5%) in broadcast news, this indicates that social media do not only play an important role as information provider, but also as visual evidence in broadcast news by showing the viewer what is happening on the ground.

RQ3 – Foreign or domesticated news?

The analysis shows that almost half (46.7%) of the articles are foreign news. 19.7% of the items are to a small (5.2%) or big (14.5%) extent domesticated for the Belgian audience. 33.5% of the articles are to a small (18.1%) or big (15.4%) extent telling the story from a Western perspective. When compared to previous research (Van Leuven et al. 2013) the Arab Spring can be considered an exceptional news event where Belgian journalists were less inclined to domesticate the news for the Belgian audience.

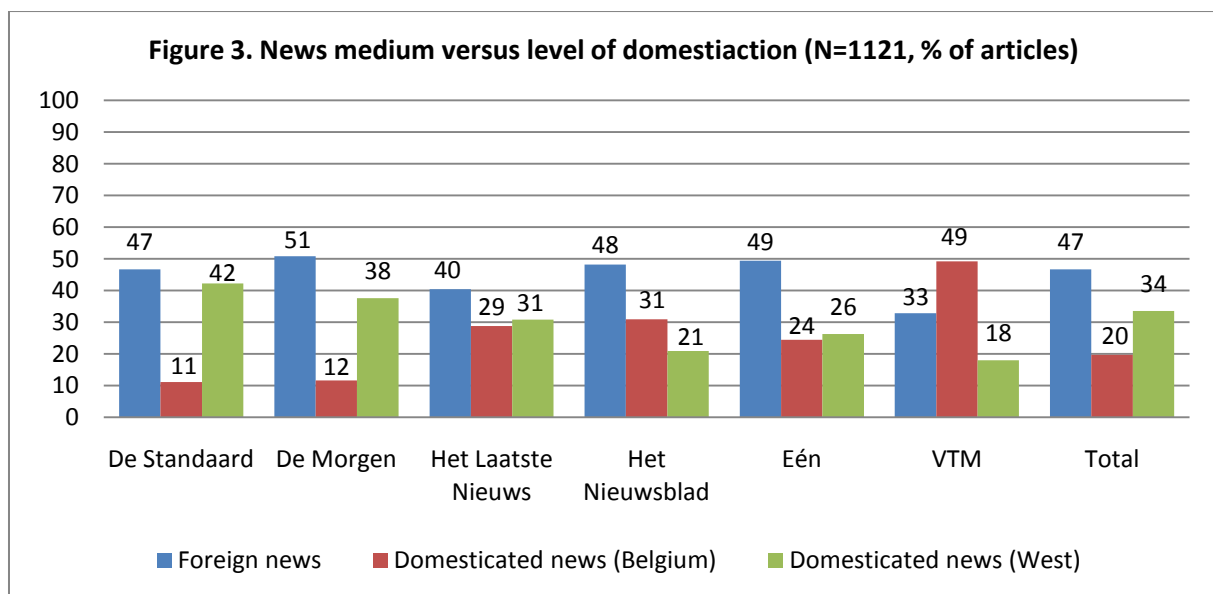
Table 1 shows that the quality media (27.6 - 31.5% of their overall coverage) report significantly ($p=0.000$) more about Syria compared to the popular media (9.8 – 13.6%) (**RQ4**). In contrast, it shows that popular media report relatively more about the Egypt uprising (53.8 – 59.0% of their overall coverage) compared to the quality media (37.6 – 46.4%). This second finding to a lesser degree also applies to the Tunisian case. This can be explained by the fact that contrary to Syria, Egypt and Tunisia are important touristic destinations. This automatically results in a more national outlook of the current events as Belgian interests are involved compared to a more global outlook in Syria. This shows that popular media prefer events that allow for a more national outlook in the news compared to the quality media who apply for a more broad range of topics, also if no Belgians are involved. The significant coherence also points at a difference between television and newspapers (**RQ5**). Table 1 shows that both broadcasters report relatively more about Tunisia and Egypt than about Syria compared to their newspaper counterparts. For example, even though the public broadcaster Eén can be considered as a quality news provider, only 17.6% of its total coverage is dedicated to the Syrian uprising (compared to 27.6% and 31.5% in the quality newspapers) while 20.2% of its total coverage reports on the Tunisian uprising (compared to 14.9% and 13.8% in the quality newspapers). This is a first indication of the fact that broadcast news is more domesticated (national outlook) than newspaper articles. These assumptions are confirmed as news about Syria is significantly ($p=0.000$)

more often foreign news (61.9% of all articles of the Syrian uprising) compared to news about Egypt and Tunisia that more often discusses the Belgian interests in the area (respectively 24.4 and 29.9%).

Table 1. News medium versus country of uprising (N=1121, % of articles)

Country	Tunisia	Egypt	Syria	Arab Spring	Total
De Standaard (Q)	47	131	87	50	315
% in newspaper	14.9	41.6	27.6	15.9	100.0
% in country	25.5	25.8	31.9	32.1	28.1
De Morgen (Q)	43	117	98	53	311
% in newspaper	13.8	37.6	31.5	17.0	100.0
% in country	23.4	23.0	35.9	34.0	27.7
Het Laatste Nieuws (P)	24	84	19	29	156
% in newspaper	15.4	53.8	12.2	18.6	100.0
% in country	13.0	16.5	7.0	18.6	13.9
Het Nieuwsblad (P)	22	62	15	11	110
% in newspaper	20.0	56.4	13.6	10.0	100.0
% in country	12.0	12.2	5.5	7.1	9.8
Eén (Q)	34	78	48	8	168
% in broadcaster	20.2	46.4	28.6	4.8	100.0
% in country	18.5	15.4	17.6	5.1	15.0
VTM (P)	14	36	6	5	61
% in broadcaster	23.0	59.0	9.8	8.2	100.0
% in country	7.6	7.1	2.2	3.2	5.4
Total	184	508	273	156	1121
% overall articles	16.4	45.3	24.4	13.9	100.0
% in country	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 3 also shows a significant coherence ($p=0.000$) between type of medium and the level of domestication. All media – except for VTM (only 32.8%) – report the Arab Spring as foreign news in about 40 to 50% of the news items. However if they domesticate the news, they do it in a different manner. The popular media more often adopt a Belgian perspective while the quality media prefer a Western perspective (RQ4). Likewise the analysis confirms that broadcast news is more often domesticated for the Belgian public while news articles more often adopt a Western point of view (RQ5).



Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article focused on the question whether Belgian news coverage of the Arab Spring shows signs of more diverse sourcing practices (RQ1-3) and whether we can find differences between different media types (RQ4 and RQ5). The findings are mixed.

On the one hand, we found signs of more diverse sourcing practices compared to previous research (Van Leuven et al. 2013). Ordinary citizens and non-mainstream groups are important news sources, social media are relatively often used in the news gathering process, and the news about the Arab Spring is less often domesticated for a Belgian audience (RQ1-3). On the other hand, our original optimism needs to be toned down, as the analysis shows that Belgian journalists mainly turn to political sources to introduce the news and set the interpretation frame for the article. Moreover, non-mainstream sources may be important news sources in quantitative terms, but this does not say anything about the quality of the coverage. It seems that ordinary citizens (as eyewitnesses) and social media platforms are mainly consulted to illustrate the information in the news article. This finding is in accordance with previous studies that showed how journalists still value networked information in terms of traditional sourcing practices (Bélair-Gagnon 2011). In a recurring critique on sourcing ordinary citizens in the news, some authors state that this approach does not add depth and new viewpoints to the message but rather dumbs-down the information in the news article (Habermas 1974). In contrast, other authors stress that this journalistic approach allows more ordinary people to understand the news from real-life experiences (Dahlgren and Gurevitch 2005; McNair 2009). In this sense, even when eyewitness accounts do not add a rational and well-considered argument to the public debate about the Arab Spring, they can still add a new layer to the discussion in telling the story from different real-life experiences. Further research of the content of the contributions of different actors is necessary to formulate conclusions about this issue.

Because of the word limit there was no room for a detailed country comparison, but in summary the analysis points out different sourcing practices in coverage about the Syrian uprising compared to Egypt and Tunisia. More specifically we found more characteristics of network journalism practices in news about Syria, with a bigger role for non-mainstream sources and social media platforms, and with a lower level of domestication for the Belgian audience. This finding can be explained by two contextual factors. First, the absence of Belgian/Western interests in the country explains the lower level of domestication. Second, it seems that the heavy media restrictions in the country inspired Belgian journalists to rely more on on-the-ground, non-mainstream sources that circumvented the restricted information access by means of digital networks and social media platforms. In a situation of information chaos (McNair 2013) the network sphere offers opportunities for sources and journalists to connect on a global scale and exhibit power abuse to a global audience. From a comparative perspective, we found more signs of network journalism practices in quality compared to popular media (RQ4), and in TV news compared to newspaper articles (RQ5).

Nonetheless, De Dobbelaer et al. (2013), who conducted a similar content analysis of the Arab Spring in Belgian TV news, found that most journalists do not actively search for user-generated content on social media platforms, but instead copy this footage from the international news agencies and international media brands (e.g. BBC, CNN). In other words, they rely on international news media to verify the reliability of user-generated content before

they incorporate it in their news output. As journalists often fail to mention their sources, further research is necessary to assess whether Belgian newspapers equally passively relied on international news media to provide user-generated content. Nonetheless, although this finding points out that most Belgian TV journalists did not actively “practice” network journalism during the Arab Spring, it cannot be denied that a change is already visible in the news output. Network journalism is still in its infancy, and thus further research should follow-up possible changes in journalistic sourcing practices.

Another remark with regard to our findings is related to the fact that the Arab Spring dominated the media agenda for several weeks and therefore most news media had their own correspondent at the spot (except for Syria because of the restricted access). This may be one of the reasons why the journalists had so many contacts with local, non-mainstream sources. Further research is needed to examine how far the diverging sourcing practices in this study can be explained by network journalism practices or by the deviation from everyday desk-bound sourcing practices where journalists may be more inclined to rely on mainstream sources (e.g. news agencies, government institutions). Second, ordinary people played a central role in the Arab Spring as they were demonstrating in search for more democratic rights. In contrast, most everyday foreign coverage stems from an institutional background such as economic negotiations between government leaders, election coverage, or intergovernmental meetings, and mainstream sources are the key players. Ethnographic studies in newsrooms may be a good starting point to find out how far journalists in their everyday newsgathering practices also make use of online networks and how far non-mainstream sources can be consulted to add depth to this kind of coverage.

Notes

¹ For more information about the choice of newspapers and the methodology of the study, contact the authors.

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